

Kaleidoscope

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Mother's toes touch the first crocus. From here, they spread out into a sea of pale purple.

If she holds her hand to her forehead and shields her eyes from the early sun, she can see white snowdrops unfolding inside the ever-widening triangle.

Anticipation flashes through every nerve when something tugs on the string extending from her chest: far away, where the flowers cover the horizon, her other heart's waiting for her.

This is where I begin.

She takes a first step.

Life tickles the sole of her foot.

That last bit of doubt melts away.

The sun climbs higher, clouds give way to a blue sky, strong winds lift her dress and, chasing it with her arms, she swings along with every twist and turn on her way towards the sun – our sun – until, here, where spring ends, she finds a child so small that its face is almost overshadowed by petals.

She picks it up, embraces it with lifelong devotion, and then watches purple and white fuse together before crumbling into a million diamonds.

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New colours come together, and before its flowers have finished forming around them, the featherlight fragrance of early summer enchants mother and child.

She saunters over to a lilac tree, reaches for one of its panicles and pulls it down for the child to sniff.

Eyes half-closed, it strokes the blossoms with its tender nose. Picks one for tasting, then hands it to Mother with a wry face. And swinging round to throw the mangled flower away, she freezes when a labyrinth of unkempt bushes comes into view.

Heart stops.

Then starts again, pounding her ribs, harder and harder and there's nothing for it, so, having reassured the child that she won't be long, she puts it down, lets the string unravel, and finally

faces the thick stem in the labyrinth's centre.

Not that long ago, drops of red were pouring down it.

Brown specks on the gravel below is all that's left of them now.

A leaf balances flat on its top, and on top of that leaf, framed by stiff sepals, lies his dead heart.

Mother gives him a moment of silence.

Then, tells him something she didn't understand at the time:

"You gave me a choice," she says, "and I should've chosen to fight."

Tears run down her face as she recalls the terror in his eyes that night, and how he begged for his life as it ebbed inside a plastic bag.

She shakes her head to break up the vision.

Just stands here and breathes for a while.

Then, works up the courage to caress his remains, but gets a graphic flashback of bloodshot eyes and recoils like a startled deer. Hopes he can sense her anyway, wherever he is.

"I wasn't brave enough, I see that now, and...I'm sorry."

Maybe she'll just touch him one more time, for luck.

"I promise to tell our child about you someday."

Collecting the string into a bundle on her way out, she can tell it's losing the resilience it had back in spring.

I know she thinks to *she-doesn't-know-what*, and holds the child close as the fresh morning splinters down to confetti.

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Mother takes one last look at the string.

Then, pulls it apart.

A little sad, she starts picking away at the scrap, but the child brushes off her hands and runs out into an ocean of colour

instead.

There's no seeing it in the prismatic rapture of high summer, but sunflowers swaying hither and thither give it away and when it comes back into view, Mother is overwhelmed with images of its father.

"Sorry, no – I'm not done."

"What!?"

"Nothing!" she shouts back, and it runs off again. Takes a tumble, but is back on its feet soon enough.

"I can't keep pretending that I'm okay," she fumes. "Have you any idea what it was like to comfort you, knowing that I would be the one left behind?"

Angry tears sting her eyes.

"I was the first woman to hold your hand. You told me so. And you told me to never let it go, so I didn't. I cherished it. Cupped its raw end with my palm. Waved it before your eyes to wake you up from the loneliness you thought was real. And what did you do? You just fled deeper into that fantasy world!"

The memory of their final night together plays inside her mind like a silent film, or a flip book, as she suppresses the clamour of him ending their relationship, but even so, once the worst scene comes up – the one where he squeals that she can keep his severed hand if she lets the rest of him go – her emotions get the better of her and she growls into her elbow.

"Why wouldn't you just WAKE UP!?"

The trees, shrouding her in red scent, suddenly make her feel cornered as she senses an impatience to forget healing and settle for distraction.

But she won't.

Not this time.

Because too much has been lived with, and all of summer's beauty can't curb what's still pressing up against her skull for lack of space:

"And it was so strange to realize that the dissociation hadn't started yet. That the sensation there and then wasn't the one.

That more was to come. I'd felt it before, you see, so, I knew what it was, and that it wasn't that. Knew a realer surreality was on its way. One I'd sacrifice my self to as evidence of my

determination to stay. And it took me forever to understand that I'd never been in any danger of disappearing, and then, I spent another forever hating you – for not having reassured me, for allowing me to lose time to that void, and..."

Little by little, the anger abates, and she wipes her cheeks in silence.

Oh, and another thing:

"The mind has strange notions of what constitutes repair, and you'll do well to remember that when you watch over me."

She hides among the cherries, picking away at the piece of string still hanging from her chest to buy herself some time, and then, steps back into view.

That is one clumsy child, she thinks to him with a loving smile when it trips on some peonies.

"You should be here," she says, content to let that be the end of it, and calls out to the child before anxiety clamps down on her in the silence.

She runs over to the peonies.

Shakes the limp body.

"Ha!"

Mother is stunned.

Then, she loses it.

"DON'T EVER DO THAT TO ME AGAIN, UNDERSTAND!?! IT WOULD KILL ME!!!"

Absolutely quiet, the child stares at her.

"I'm sorry" she says, holding back fresh tears as guilt washes over her. "Darling, please, I'm so sorry."

It gives her a careful nod, not convinced of its innocence.

No, not yet! she groans internally when everything starts coming

apart. *I need more time – can't leave it like this!* But there's nothing she can do, other than watch as the colourful crystals settle into a new landscape.

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They end up in front of a house. A big house – manor, really – with a facade of yellow rock, and delicate white frames around its many windows.

Mother draws a deep breath, but the child runs inside before she gets a chance to explain herself.

Letting it see her cry will only make things worse, she knows that, so, fearful of driving it away like all the others she stays where she is. Can't afford to make another mistake. Doesn't want to be a disappointment anymore.

She looks around and sees nothing, except for the house and the flint walk leading up to it, of course. And the rottenness won't ease off, but having managed to at least force it off her face, she enters the manor through its cathedral-mullioned doors.

Where are we?

There's no furniture, but a row of glass domes runs along the yellow walls, each one containing a middlemist red, and high above her head, jade vines, also encased in glass, hang from the ceiling.

This wasn't here last time.

Doors like the ones she came in through lead out to the meticulously landscaped garden on the other side, where a neatly mowed lawn covers dozens of acres, and the house stands on higher ground than the enormous backyard – fit for royalty, with just as neatly trimmed evergreen bushes planted in lavish arrangements – so Mother stops at the open doors to see where the child's disappeared to.

Great...

The evergreens are so tall and many that a thousand people could hide among them, plus: flint walks run straight from here to the far end, and for all she knows the child might've followed them all the way to the red field beyond.

She listens for clues, but hears nothing. Wishes they still had the

string. Picks an apple from a nearby tree, then decides:

I'll simply have to search the grounds one walk at a time.

Perhaps she's going too fast, because she soon reaches the massive field of roses with no sign of the child. On her way back to the house, however, her heart starts pulling to her left, and she's about to turn around when, suddenly, there's a noise so strange, it can't possibly come from her child, and yet...

There isn't time to look for an opening, so she drops the apple to climb one leafy barrier after another instead, and, having landed on the other side of the last one, finds the child slumped over the field's edge.

She lays her hand on its shoulder to pull it upright, but it lets out such a wail that she lets go again and gets in front of it to see what's wrong.

Her own heart forces itself into her throat.

"It was already loose, I swear!"

Mother says nothing. Just stares at the weak lump straining itself in the child's hand.

"I didn't mean to," it says, and the tremor in its voice lifts her out of the shock.

"I know you didn't."

Leaning in close, she sees marks from doomed attempts at ripping it free, and swallows back vomit when the child explains:

"I didn't mean to be rude to him, mum, I'm sorry, I just got scared 'cause he was all blue, and...one of his hands was missing, and he pulled up his shirt and there was a hole in his chest, and he pointed at my heart and said I had no right to take it from him, and I'd never even seen him before!"

Radiating the sort of confused shame only a child can feel, it tearfully begs for Mother's forgiveness by telling her what happened next:

"I said I was sorry, but he grabbed me hard and pushed me onto the roses, and my heart got stuck on the thorns, and then I was just trying to get it loose, and it just fell out – honest!!! I'm sorry, mum..."

Mother has no idea how he got to her child, and right now, she doesn't care.

"Don't worry, sweetheart. It's not your fault."

Gingerly, she pulls the little hand away whilst folding her own around the nearly-effete muscle. Tries lifting it off the thorns, but freezes at a scream so haunting, she can't believe it's coming from a human being.

Not wanting the child to anticipate the pain, she pulls the rose out of the ground without warning. Then, does her best to adjust the heart's position to the thorns whilst ignoring raw pleas for her to stop.

Nothing for it, she thinks to herself, and gives it a violent tug before her mind goes blank because the futile attempt's cranked the screaming up to primitive shrills.

There's no need to turn around and look – that metallic rustling behind them can only mean one thing: the house and garden are disintegrating.

"No! No, no, no, no, NO!"

Soon enough, countless upon countless red roses are getting torn to shreds by an invisible force rumbling through the air, and flakes assemble themselves into a mosaic which is then split in half in front of Mother.

To her left, they settle into a new spring, with a new child waving to her from the arms of a new man.

To her right, time slows down, before, somewhere out there in the distance, coming to a stop.

Mother's chest starts pulling towards the man, but she stands her ground – something deeper yet resisting the attempt at trapping her inside another summer.

She looks around for something, anything, and the only bit that hasn't been destroyed yet is the rose keeping her child in this rapidly shrinking nothing.

Right, no time to lose!

Ignoring the cries of pain, she breaks off the root and stabs herself with the sharp stem.

Feels the thorns dig into her heart.

Feels how furiously it tries to beat them off.

Like ripping off a band-aid, she tells herself, and yanks it out.

Determination overshadowing any mortal pain, she severs their veins and arteries with her teeth.

Drops the child's heart to the vacuum beneath them.

Throws her own into the left half of the mosaic.

Then, grabs the finally-pacified child by the arm, and drags it with her into the right half.

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Mother and child cling to each other as they fall.

Where are they going?

Does it matter? she argues with herself before solid ground punches the breath out of her.

For some time, lying where they've landed is all either of them can do, but recovery eventually kicks in and they get up on their knees.

The front of Mother's dress is soaked. At first, she thought the red beneath her was blood too, but as she blinks the daze under control, leaves come into focus.

"Are you alright?"

The child nods in disorientation.

With a groan not suiting her youth, Mother gets to her feet. Bends down as far as she dares, and helps the child stand up.

They stay where they are, just...lustreless. Might've gaped at the myriad of fluffy piles, but can't be bothered to lift their gaze above their feet.

This is all my fault.

She's just not right. Hasn't been for a long time. She knows that.

And whatever others have been or done, to her or to themselves,

makes no difference now, because her mind's long since conformed into a kaleidoscope – it breaks down anyone who dares touch it, and flings their remains around to match its own chaos. That's all there's to it.

My fault.

The autumn's barely gotten itself together when, sooner than she anticipated, its scorching colours are perforated by white flakes.

"Mum..."

All she needs.

"I know, darling."

With her final strength, she pulls the child back into her arms, holds its head to her open chest, and soothes it with a promise it'll never know she can't keep:

"Your father's waiting for us. We're gonna be fine."

A last, orange leaf disappears beneath the snow.

It's probably cold, but they can't tell.

Then, far away but close, a light appears, and blinding their pale eyes, it spreads until all loss is outshined.

Mother comes loose from a life lived by others, helps her child abandon its drained vessel, and lets the light guide them into soothing darkness.

Together.

A peace as good as any.